



JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES I. INTRODUCTION

JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES OF IRAN

i. INTRODUCTION

Jewish communities have been living upon the Persian plateau since ca. 721 BCE, when King Sargon II (r. 721-705 BCE) relocated large communities of conquered Israelites “in the cities of the Medes” (western and northern regions of present-day Persia; 2 Kings 17:6; 18:10-11). The most significant mass immigration of Jews to Persia, however, occurred when Cyrus II the Great (b. ca. 600 BCE, d. 530 BCE; see [CYRUS iii.](#)) conquered Babylon on 29 October 539 BCE, freed all Jewish slaves and granted them permission to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple, and freely worship their god (Cyrus Cylinder [see [CYRUS iv.](#)], lines 30-36; Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23). While some returned to Jerusalem, others remained in Babylon, and a sizeable portion migrated east, eventually to settle throughout the Persian empire. Though scarce, all available evidence suggests that Jews lived freely and prosperously under Achaemenid rule, with some like the Ezra and Nehemiah even attaining highly influential positions in government (see ii. below).

Persian Jews continued to maintain generally cordial relationships with the



successive dynasties between Achaemenid rule and the Arab conquest. The most notable exceptions to this occurred during those periods when the ruling government's particular religious zealotry led to the harassment of all non-Zoroastrian minorities. For the most part, however, the Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian rulers were tolerant of Jews, at times even allowing for state-sanctioned Jewish autonomous government (see iii. below).

With the arrival of Islam in Persia in 636 CE and the consequent implementation of the Pact of 'Omar, all non-Muslims acquired dhimmi (*demmi*) status: a second-class citizenship that granted certain basic legal protections and limited rights to property in exchange for an arbitrarily determined poll tax (*jazia*) and an indisputable recognition of Muslim dominion and supremacy (Tsadik, 2007, pp. 25-26). Despite this insurmountable inequality, from the Arab conquest until the rise of the Safavid dynasty in 1501, the Jews of Persia lived in relative symbiosis with their Muslim compatriots, as some became important court physicians and others powerful bankers and financiers who at various times virtually funded the entire 'Abbasid court and government (Mez, pp. 478-79; Fischel, pp. 13-33; Lewis, pp. 67-106). A number of Jewish sectarian movements also took place in the earlier part of this period, though none with lasting influence (see iv. below). It is also in this period that the main body of Judeo-Persian literature was produced (see ix. JUDEO-PERSIAN LITERATURE). The various social changes brought on by the Safavid court would also prove pivotal in many aspects of the Jewish community's daily life, namely the Jewish community's role in the preservation, development, and proliferation of classical and popular Persian music (see xi. below).

Starting with the reign of Nāser al-Din Shah Qājār (r. 1848-96), British and French Jewry began exerting increasing pressure on the crown to provide equal rights and legal protection to Persian Jews. In conjunction with more general Western reforms throughout Persia, these pressures would eventually help improve circumstances for the Jewish community, even if measurable only in the slightest degree (see v. below). The arrival of the [Alliance Israélite Universelle](#) (AIU) French schools in Persia marks one of the most significant factors of European influence on the situation of Persian Jews during this period. The first AIU school opened in Tehran in 1898 after nearly twenty-five years of negotiations, thus finally granting Persian Jews the opportunity to receive a formal education for the first time in centuries (Nikbakht, p. 199). With the Constitutional Revolution the life of the Jewish community also began



to improve. Jews were subsequently allowed to have one representative in the Majles, although the first was a Shi'ite clergyman named Sayyed 'Abd-Allāh Behbahāni (d. 15 July 1910) (Levi, 1960, III, pp. 847-49; Āfāri, pp. 44-52). This period also witnessed the start of various Jewish movements and institutions, such as the publication of a Judeo-Persian weekly called *Shalom* starting in 1915; the establishment of Hevrat ha-mehazzevet sfat 'ever (a society for strengthening the Hebrew language) in 1917; and the organization of the Anjoman-e s'Āiyunit-e Irān (The Zionist association of Iran) in 1919 (Davidi, pp. 240-45).

With the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41), the condition of Persian Jews continued to improve (see vi. below). More socially assimilated into the general community than they had been for the past five centuries, they were now subject to all the same social changes and political reforms as their Muslim compatriots, such as Reza Shah's mandatory dress reform for men in 1928 and the official unveiling of women in 1936 (Sahim, p. 189). Under Reza Shah's rule, all laws discriminating against Jews were eventually abolished, most significantly the Shi'ite inheritance laws that granted full and exclusive inheritance to any Shi'ite convert from a Jewish family, regardless of proximity of kinship to the deceased, were abolished (Levi, 1997, pp. 512-13). With the rise to power of the Third Reich, Reza Shah was quick to align himself with Hitler, in part because of the ardent nationalistic ideologies they both shared (Pirnazar, 1996, pp. 95-97; Stein-Evers, pp. 4-6). This political sympathy quickly led to uncensored anti-Semitic propaganda throughout Persia, with entities such as Radio Berlin and the Pan-Iranian Party inciting the public's anti-Semitic sentiments (Levi, 1960, III, pp. 969-71; Menashri, p. 386; Pirnazar, 1996, pp. 99-104). For a brief period, Muslims in cities such as Isfahan, Shiraz, Kermanshah, Sanandaj, and Tehran laid claims of ownership on Jewish homes and Jewish women, in the anticipated arrival of the German army and the expected exportation of the homeowners and the women's husbands, fathers, and/or brothers (N. Sarshar; Kermanshachi; Kālili, pp. 184-86; Rafailzadeh). This did not prove the case in Kashan, however, where Dāvud Jāvid, the then head of the Anjoman-e kalimiān-e kāšān (Kashan Jewish Society), went so far as to secure official protection and have the city's Jewish quarter guarded by uniformed police officers (Haghani).

With the rise of Moḥammad Rezā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-79), an entire generation of French-educated AIU graduates were ready to join the country's full-throttle westernization and industrialization campaign, and Persian Jews



found their way into virtually every sector of the country's new or burgeoning intellectual, artistic, financial, and commercial arenas. Hamadan AIU graduate Rabi' Mošfeq Hamadāni (b. 1912) became the founding editor-in-chief of *Keyhān* newspaper in 1941 (Hamadāni, pp. 215-18). Soleymān Ḥaim (1886-1970; q.v.) compiled what remains to date the most popular bilingual Persian-French and Persian-English dictionaries. By the fall of the shah in 1979, Persia's estimated 85,000 Jews had witnessed an unprecedented rise in social status and economic prosperity, with examples like Ḥāj Ḥabib Elqānāyān's (ca. 1914-79) Plasco as the country's leading plastics and aluminum producer; Ayub Yusefzāda's (1930-95) Rayco Technique Industrial Group, Iran Margo Trading Company, and Agrifarm Machinery as the largest distributors of agricultural machines and oil and industrial pumps in the Middle East; and Loṭf-Allāh Ḥay's (b. 4 December 1917) Kashmiran Corporation as one of the only three producers of cashmere wool worldwide (Levin, 1999, pp. 23-24; Yousefzadeh; Hay; Sarshar, ed., 2002, pp. 392-93).

On 9 May 1979, Ḥāj Ḥabib Elqānāyān became the first private citizen to be executed by the revolutionary court of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Elghanyan; Sarshar, ed., 2002, p. 423; Levin, 1999, pp. 25-27). This event quickly became a factor in further precipitating the emigration of Persia's Jewish community, some estimated 60,000 members of which would eventually leave the country. Of these, by and large the largest percentage settled in southern California, while another sizeable portion moved to New York, predominantly to live in Great Neck, Long Island. The next largest segment moved to Israel, while the remaining numbers scattered elsewhere in the United States, England, United Kingdom, and Australia.

Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran is home to an estimated 25,000 Jews, who continue to have one representative in the parliament (see vii. below). The overwhelming majority of them live in Tehran, while the numbers in some of the oldest communities such as Isfahan and Hamadan have dwindled to a mere few hundred. Jewish schools, synagogues, and other social non-political organizations continue to function in the country, making Persian Jews the single largest community of Jews anywhere in the Middle East outside the State of Israel to have lived on the same land consistently over the past twenty-five centuries.



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